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ENGLISH REQUIREMENTS¹

SOME schools may have outgrown the uniform requirements in English, doubtless some schools never needed them at all; we should not on that account underestimate the good results that have followed their general acceptance. I have yet to hear of a single school that has diminished its English work since their adoption. Schools that were doing more than the requirements call for have continued to do more. There are hundreds of schools that were doing less. Many of these have been induced to pull themselves up to the minimum standard thus set before them. If in all other respects these requirements are right and just, the fact that they are uniform does not count against them. Indeed uniformity tends to give them an influence and a backing which they would not otherwise have. Schools whose graduates enter college on certificate are not concerned about the uniformity of requirement. We want the uniformity for those schools whose candidates must be examined.

I am not in favor of dispensing with these requirements, even though the selection of books to be read has not always been the wisest. We need these requirements or something like them for the schools that are not yet giving sufficient attention to English. The requirements have not fostered short cram courses, as this resolution charges. They have in many cases opened the way for a considerable amount of English work where there was little before. If short cram courses are possible under these requirements it is because the colleges do not insist that the requirements shall be met. Nor are the requirements responsible for the inferiority of the English instruction in the schools, if such inferiority must be admitted. Boards of education and high-school principals are responsible for that wherever it exists. It is the board that elects inferior teachers; it is the principal who assigns the English work, or peddles it around in small lots among the various specialists whom he has gathered about him to teach the biology and the Greek and the mathematics, and whom he now asks with profuse apologies to take a class in English apiece. The specialist in biology

¹ Paper presented at the meeting of the North Central Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools, April 1, 1898, in discussing the first resolution (see note, p. 328).

is of course deeply interested in his English class, and the practical working of the theory that the English may safely be entrusted to anybody who has the time for it is again most beautifully exemplified

What this resolution aims at would be attained if the colleges recognized the work in English which the best high schools are doing over and above the present minimum requirements. Some of these schools now provide a full four years' course in English with class work four or five hours a week. This is about twice the amount of time and work which the majority of the secondary schools are devoting to English, and which the majority of the colleges are accepting in fulfillment of the present English requirements. The first English conference called for a full fourth of the secondary-school period. The colleges are accepting about an eighth. I make this statement after looking at the programmes of a large number of schools. There are two ways of meeting this practical situation. One is to prescribe a full four years' course in English for all high schools. This would of course mean that some other subjects must receive less attention than they receive at present. It would also mean for some years a decided break between the schools and the colleges, a thing much to be deplored. A better way to meet the situation is to provide two sets of requirements. Retain the present minimum requirements for all; they ask for little enough and there is no law against doing more than they call for. Then provide a set of advanced requirements, optional with similar advanced requirements in other subjects, and affix a just admission credit for this additional work. Such an arrangement would be in harmony with the spirit of the second resolution and the proposed substitute for the third resolution, which are to be discussed tomorrow. Schools are unequal and will remain so. It is idle to assume the contrary as we do by our single set of requirements in English and in other subjects.

It is desirable that the colleges and secondary schools should come to an agreement as to the meaning of the present minimum requirement in English. There is all the more need of this now that some of the best secondary schools are calling for additional entrance credit for their English work. Judging from the Bulletin on College Entrance English, published by the University of the state of New York, one would be forced to conclude that the colleges by themselves can come to no agreement in the matter. Yet it may safely be assumed that whatever else the colleges may ask in the way of preparation in English, they ask at any rate a fair proficiency in English composition. Most of the specimen papers in the bulletin say as plainly as possible

to the secondary schools, "Send us candidates who can write well. We agree to draw the subjects from books which they are supposed to have read." And I venture the assertion that there are very few colleges in this country which condition a candidate in English if his paper shows that he knows how to express himself well in writing. I say this with a full knowledge of the large number of technical and minute queries to be found in those same specimen papers.

I believe that it will be best for the schools and best for the colleges to make a fair proficiency in composition the leading aim of the minimum requirement in English. Let the classics prescribed be used with this one thing in view, to encourage written and oral expression, to afford a large amount of practice under sparing criticism, until good habits of expression are secured. The common way of treating the prescribed books is not calculated either to foster a love of reading or to help the pupil to power in composition. We begin all too soon the intensive study of literature; we begin our minute, word by word, examination of these books before we have created an interest in the story or the message which they convey. Our microscopic examination of the text reveals with monstrous clearness some things which even adult readers usually overlook, but it gives no connected vision of the whole, and with young pupils it kills interest in the subject-matter. The younger classes are not ready for the intensive study of these classics. There is no momentum in this minute and fidgety work. It cannot be undertaken with profit until a large amount of reading has been done and an interest in reading has been created. Put the work of the minimum requirement on the composition basis. Read the prescribed books for what they tell in the way of story and description. Let analysis stop when the natural divisions of the story and its larger structural elements have been discovered. And let all of the reading be utilized in daily composition work, oral and written, in reproduction of the reading, and on themes suggested by the reading, and based on the observation and experience of the pupil. In this way we shall secure what is most needed in the schools: practice in writing, talking, and reading aloud. Too many schools are assuming that if we only provide enough good reading, the power of expression will come somehow of itself. We might trust the silent influence of good reading to make good writers, if we had forty years at our disposal instead of four. The most difficult part of school work, the part which needs the most careful supervision and the most unremitting attention, we leave the most to chance.

If anyone objects that by this plan, composition work is over-emphasized, I reply that by this plan you will secure more thorough reading, and a greater amount and variety of reading, than you can possibly secure if you make minute literary analysis the end and aim of your work. That part of the resolution is true which says that, at the present time, literature is being studied at the expense of drill in the forms of expression. If any secondary school can afford to give to English what amounts to only two years of work four or five times a week, it will secure the best results, both for practical skill in writing and for the appreciation of literature by putting the work on the composition basis. A pupil whose English work should stop here would have read a considerable number of books, not with the minuteness which delays and discourages at the outset but with a satisfactory rapidity. He would have read these books, not as specimens of literary art but for the thought and meaning to be found in them. Being called on day by day to give expression to the ideas started by his reading, he would be afforded a large amount of practice in oral and written composition. This then, is the programme I propose for meeting the minimum requirement in English as it is prescribed at present. Its leading aim is proficiency in composition. It involves the extensive rather than the intensive study of the classics prescribed. It means two hours a week through four years, if a school is aiming merely to meet the minimum requirement. It means four hours for two years in those schools which have provided a full four years' course in English.

For the latter an advanced requirement in English should be provided without delay, covering two years of work four or five class hours a week, with suitable admission credit annexed. Three-fourths of this requirement should be literature; about one-fourth grammar rhetoric, and composition. The previous reading of the class would have prepared the way for the intensive study of literature, and the transition to this would now be easy and natural. In this advanced requirement the open list of books called for by the resolution would find a place. Here there should be ample scope for the individuality of the teacher. Whether the works chosen for study should be taken up historically by literary periods, or one literary species after another, should be determined by each school for itself. But the advanced requirement should stand for the systematic study of literary works as works of art; and its aim should be appreciation, with all that the term implies, rather than the practical aim of the minimum requirement. A

critical nomenclature for the intensive study of literature is a necessity, consequently a brief course in rhetorical terms and in the classification and characteristics of literary species should form a part of the advanced requirement. Furthermore, such an examination of literary forms as is here contemplated would require considerable attention to the language itself. The older ballads, Chaucer and Shakespeare, invite to some knowledge of historical grammar. Finally, there should be opportunity in these last years of the high school for theme work in argumentation and the more difficult forms of exposition, which are at present attempted too early in the course.

The double requirement that I have outlined recognizes openly and publicly what we all know to be the fact. There are two classes of schools: those that barely meet the present English requirement and those that are able to accomplish considerably more. The colleges and especially the state universities cannot at present increase their demands in English without decreasing them in other subjects of study. We cannot secure four full years of English from enough schools to justify making this a fixed requirement for all. But we can and should recognize and encourage advanced work wherever it is done. A system of double requirements in all of the leading studies, coupled with a recognition of the substantial equality of studies, when thoroughly pursued, ought to bring about closer relations everywhere between the secondary schools and the colleges and universities. If, by the publication of a syllabus in English which has been advocated here, we show the way clearly and unmistakably, we may hasten the date when Shakespeare and Milton will be accorded as much attention in all schools as Homer and Vergil; Burke and Webster, as much as Cicero; and perhaps even English composition may be cared for with as great solicitude as Latin, and Greek, and German composition are now.

In France the study of the mother tongue occupies a full fifth of the school time. The French evidently do not believe that French can be mastered by studying almost anything in the world except French. American schools are surely coming to the same belief in regard to English. All of us believe with President Eliot that "the power to understand rightly and to use critically the mother tongue is the consummate flower of all education." Yet I have sometimes wondered if an educated Frenchman who should examine some of our school programmes would suspect us of entertaining this high sentiment.

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